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978-0-521-45127-7 - Poetics of the Feminine: Authority and Literary Tradition in William Carlos Williams, Mina Loy, Denise Levertov, and Kathleen Fraser

Linda A. Kinnahan

Excerpt

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Introduction

From the moment I began thinking about the shape of this book, I found I could never easily designate its center, and that as I wrote, the center kept altering, slipping, transforming. Just as simultaneity characterizes the modernist endeavor to reconsider reality, and a nonlinear layering of thought compels much postmodern poetics, this study takes shape as shifting, overlapping planes moving through a flattened space so that at any one moment we see numerous perspectives configured in changing relationship to each other. Is it a book about Williams, or modernism, or poetic daughters in a male tradition, or language innovation, or feminist poetics? William Carlos Williams is certainly the “big daddy” of the four poets examined here, a modernist giant looming with other male poets over Denise Levertov and Kathleen Fraser, and a modernist privileged in a literary history that has erased his radical contemporary, Mina Loy. Obviously, Williams remains the binding presence throughout the book, but I would encourage thinking about this presence as a translucent gauze that changes in tone, texture, shape, and even substance as various lights shine through it. To a significant degree, this shifting quality emerges when we recognize the impact of different gender-inflected strains of modernism upon Williams’s writings. Operating at an intersection of a modernism practiced by men and a counterstrain practiced by women, Williams’s work and his poetic theories traverse questions of subjectivity, tradition, and language, illuminating the gender dimensions of such questions and the process of poetic production.¹

In exploring such concerns through the forms and subjects of his poetry and prose, Williams joins a line of woman modernists whose work, recently retrieved, is expanding our notion of the cultural moment of “modernism” and challenging the politics of its canonical formation. This recovery of women authors who practiced, edited, and influenced experimental writing early in the twentieth century revises and potentially repoliticizes our reading of modernism and of subsequent gener-

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ations of writers. Positioning Williams in relationship to women writing within and descending from the modernist movement, this study looks at the shape Williams's modernism takes on when considered through the poetic efforts of Mina Loy, Denise Levertov, and Kathleen Fraser – three women belonging to three different generations of Anglo-American poets and writing within different historical contexts. By considering their encounters with a male-dominated tradition, this study asks a double question in regard to these women writers: What can women poets, writing with an informed awareness of Williams, teach us about him, and just as importantly, what can they teach us about the process, for women, of constructing a writing self within a male tradition?

Janet Wolff, discussing the gender dynamics of literary tradition, encourages attention to the “clear, if complex, relationship between woman as cultural producer and woman as ‘sign’ ” that informs the experience of a woman artist within a male-dominated tradition (*Feminine Sentences* 113). The obvious centrality of “woman as ‘sign’ ” within Williams's works has motivated numerous studies of images of women and ideas of the feminine in his poetry and prose;² particularly through the efforts of feminist criticism and theory, a groundwork has been laid for rethinking Williams's modernism as a site for gender struggle. By bringing Loy, Levertov, and Fraser, as cultural producers, into the equation, I am not interested in demonstrating a conventional line of influence; rather, this study investigates the negotiations of all four poets with the masculinist authority of tradition and resituates Williams through the reexplorations of modernism that these women, in different ways, exhibit in their work.

My study began with the observation of the frequency with which women poets, writing within varied strains of American poetry, have claimed Williams as an enabling predecessor. I first began to consider what such a claim meant for both the father and daughter figures and why Williams in particular kept cropping up as a poet who provided space for women writing explicitly woman-centered poetry. Denise Levertov, establishing early on a direct line to Williams, says he “cleared ground . . . gave us tools” to “discover the rhythms of our experience” (*PIW* 245). Diane Wakoski writes that Williams created a “set of possibilities” for the American poet; in her eyes, “there is no poet who has created more possibilities of roads to travel in my own American journey,” and as a result, her poetry, her “own little song of self, exist[s] partially because of permission I receive from Dr. Williams to take these particulars of my life, as if they had a common grain” (“William Carlos Williams” 47). Alice Notley, penning an article entitled “Dr. Williams' Heiresses,” emphatically stresses: “It's because of Williams that you can include every thing that's things – & maybe everything that's words – is that going too far? – if you are only up to noticing everything that

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your life does include. Which is hard. Too many people have always already been telling you for years what your life includes" (4). To which Rachel Blau DuPlessis responds "Including Williams," a terse rejoinder revealing the restrictiveness of influence at play in the same plane of empowerment. About her own poetic relationship with Williams, DuPlessis sees herself

enabled by his enabling
 disenfranchised by my position in his enabling
 wobble wobble wobble

(*Pink Guitar* 62)

Similarly, Susan Howe admits that "as a poet I feel closer to Williams's writing about writing . . . than I do to most critical studies . . . by professional scholars," even though the "ambiguous paths of kinship pull me in opposite ways at once" ("Introduction," *My Emily Dickinson* 7).

This sense of ambiguity, of a simultaneous enabling and disenfranchisement, compels one overarching set of questions that arise in reading Williams in conjunction with women poets, particularly through the ways they negotiate masculinized notions of poetic authority and creativity. Positioned as daughters within a predominately male tradition, many twentieth-century women poets have explored and challenged the gendered assumptions defining "the poet," and their work becomes a record of that challenge, whether leveled explicitly or suggested through subversive, implicit tactics. When we begin to consider those challenges, we begin – as many critics and poets are currently doing – to engage in important revisions of literary history. Given received (male) versions of literary history, we are accustomed to reading Williams back through a Ginsberg or an Olson or a Silliman or a Creeley; we think of Williams in conjunction with Pound or Eliot or Stevens, measuring his modernism against theirs. This study redirects such readings of Williams, considering him within a context of female poets. When we read him through the works of Loy, Levertov, and Fraser, he becomes a different kind of modernist, more closely akin, in deconstructing prevalent, gendered ideologies of poetic authority, to a group of women modernists that includes Stein, Loy, Moore, and H.D. More precisely, in the midst of his self-conscious formulation of a modern poetry, his absorption of the gender-inflected poetics of these modernist women helps shape a poetry bearing the marks of a tradition of innovative women writers. Often these marks are overwritten; at other times his debt to women, particularly Moore and Stein, is unequivocally voiced. Drawn to different modernisms at once, Williams stands as a bridge between a Poundian modernism and a female counterstrain, a position that is often conflicted and contradictory.

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The first two chapters examine Williams's early poetry and prose, focusing particularly on journal publications in the 1910s (the *Egoist*, *Others*, and *The Masses*); the collections *Al Que Quiere!* (1917), *Sour Grapes* (1921), and *Spring and All* (1923); and the essays in *In the American Grain* (1925). Discussing these texts within the historically specific framework of first-wave American feminism, these chapters seek to redefine Williams's relationship to ideas of modernism centered on Ezra Pound, to feminist politics of the time, and to the works of women modernists. In the 1910s and 1920s, Williams is formulating a self-consciously modernist poetics, moving away from the Keatsian verse of his first book toward a modernism of language innovation. His struggle during these years with a new poetics – a restructuring of language that reconceives its relationship to experience – manifests itself forcefully in the 1923 *Spring and All*, his manifesto of the modernist imagination. The movement toward this volume and its collaged expression of a modernist poetics engaged Williams in reconsiderations of traditional ideas, forms, and institutions that ranged beyond the literary but, in his mind, were inseparably linked to literature and language.

To advocate the modern and the new, Williams, like his contemporaries, relentlessly questioned the old; yet, as numerous recent critics argue, this questioning on the part of most male modernists rarely extended to the grounds of gender. In fact, the masculinization of modernism reinforced with a vengeance the status quo of sexual ideology. Marianne DeKoven, warning against a conflation of avant-garde writing and *écriture féminine*, reminds us that “male supremacism and misogyny” coexisted comfortably within the modernist project for many writers (“Male Signature” 79). Equally blunt, Rachel Blau DuPlessis asserts that “Modernist agendas concealed highly conventional metaphors and narratives of gender” (*Pink Guitar* 44). Positing a striking example of such a narrative, Carolyn Burke demonstrates Pound's masculinization of creativity, a gesture excluding women as creators and situating them as material upon which the explicitly phallic potency of the male poet could force itself in shaping new forms from a feminized chaos (“Getting Spliced”). Andreas Huyssen, also arguing against a general characterization of modernism as feminine writing, identifies the “powerful masculinist and misogynist current within the trajectory of modernism” (“Mass Culture as Woman” 49). As Janet Wolff urges, reconstructing a history of modernism involves not just an expansion of the canon but a more complex “necessary task”: “to dismantle a particular [masculine] ideology of modernism” (*Feminine Sentences* 56).³

Attentive to modernism's masculine gestures, this study of Williams's early modernist works identifies the struggle with issues of gender taking place within the writings most foundational to his efforts to create a

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modern poetics. While asserting a poetic voice, the early poems continually interrogate the claim to authority enabling such assertion; significantly, this concern with poetic authority takes on highly gendered configurations as the poems explore and often question the materiality of male authority, particularly as linked to poetic creativity and production. Thus, in these poems we can trace a concern with the movement from mundane, daily particulars (the local) to overarching systems and institutions of power, linked through structures of gender. Developing during Williams's formative poetic years, a consuming struggle with the traditional association of poetic voice and male creativity radiates into considerations of the relationship between these literary assumptions and the ideologies of gender regulating the cultural, economic, historical, religious, and social realms of American life.

As Williams works through the question of authority in his early poetry, its contingent relationship with structures and conventions of gender is repeatedly brought to the surface, questioned, challenged, exposed. Significantly, these texts foreground Williams's position as a male poet in relationship to these dynamics, and that position alternately oscillates between ambivalence, self-condemnation, vulnerability, and complicity with the status quo, while often ultimately undermining his own basis for poetic authority. Constantly linking poetic speech to gendered relations of power, he scrutinizes his own authority to speak when based upon a (masculinized) power structured through gendered hierarchy, through relations of dominance and submission. Williams, as a result, moves toward a different formulation of authority – an authority envisioned as a model of contact or contiguity that allows for difference rather than suppressing it through hierarchy.

Williams's struggle with poetic authority does not occur in a vacuum, and a central concern of this study is to contextualize these early works within first-wave feminism, particularly in its impact upon concurrent formulations of modernism. For decades a neglected force within narratives of history, American and British feminism of the early century is now being reconsidered as a powerful presence to which modernist writers, male and female, responded.⁴ While at times displaying an anxiety over challenges to the sexual status quo, Williams also participates to an important and previously unconsidered degree in feminism's reconsiderations of patriarchal structures of power. A vigorous and plural movement, conspicuously public, the feminist movement in the 1910s defied conventional notions of womanhood, of family, and of masculine power; we see this defiance inflected within Williams's early poetry and in his resistance to Ezra Pound's more masculinized ideas of modernism.

Williams's admiration of Mina Loy's feminist modernism underscores this resistance. The impact of feminist thought upon Williams's poetry

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of the late teens and early twenties coincides with his closest involvement with the poetry and person of Mina Loy, a British woman whose radical embrace of feminism clearly defines her poetry and her poetic reception in America. Loy's interest in American feminism predated her arrival in New York in 1917; by that date, New York circles of the avant-garde would already be familiar with her poetry and its feminist slant through publication in such journals as Alfred Stieglitz's *Camera Work*. Through their association with the same artistic circles in New York, Williams came to know Loy and her poetry, admiring both. Although Loy's name would fade from New Critical narratives of literary modernism, she was considered an important innovative poet in her time, cited by her contemporaries as a major player in the modernist movement. In reclaiming Loy as a significant and influential modernist writer, as with reclamations of other women writers, we begin to discern what Janet Wolff terms the "new literary and visual forms and strategies [that] were invented and deployed to capture and represent the changed situation of women in the modern world, both in the private and public arenas" (61). Loy's example demonstrates an important intersection of modernism and feminism involving a rejection of traditional definitions of gender as an integral part of a claim to new forms of literature. This interaction between feminism and modernism, which characterizes the work of many women modernists, provides the context in Chapter 1 for examining the early poems of Williams in specific relationship to Loy's works, particularly in their critique of gender authority.

Loy's impact upon Williams is part of a broader pattern of interaction between the male poet and female modernists. The final chapter and the Conclusion return to this topic to discuss the implications of Williams's adaptation of formal strategies practiced by women writers as modes of cultural critique. Rather than looking only at Williams's contemporaries, however, Chapter 4 draws upon a more recent generation of experimental writers who have uncovered and incorporated a feminist formal heritage from women modernists. The work of Kathleen Fraser is extensively discussed to help establish a groundwork for understanding a tradition attentive to the complex relationships between women's innovative writing and a resistance to patriarchal structures. Williams's *Spring and All* is then read in relationship to this formal mode of resistance and the directions taken by Fraser in working out of a tradition of women experimental writers. The Conclusion briefly discusses *Paterson* in light of this tradition, reading the epic as a conflicted site of lineage – a poem claiming a paternal line and a masculinist potency yet simultaneously undermining the basis for such potency in its yearning toward a maternal configuration of creativity and lineage. This late work remains painfully unresolved in its sexual politics; underscoring this lack of resolution, the

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concluding comments of this study aim to suggest ways of approaching the epic through the gender-inflected struggle with poetic authority linking his early writing with the works of modernist women.

Thus, Williams's historical orientation in relationship to first-wave feminism and women modernists, themselves influenced by the light cast by feminism upon modes of patriarchy, forms an essential framework for my reading of his concern with gender. Though Williams has alternately been taken to task for displaying sexist attitudes toward women and celebrated for valorizing them, these are two sides of the same reductionist coin. It has served to bring important considerations of gender into currency but now needs to be carried further. Williams speaks of women often; women populate his poems richly; "woman" is articulated in terms of a poetic principle at various points in his career. While I am centrally concerned with Williams's conception of the feminine, his representation of the female, and his appropriation of a feminine/maternal creativity, I want to argue against a narrowly quick and familiar accusation of essentialism, for despite the universalizing gesture motivating many of his articulations of "the female principle," this gesture is complicated by the deessentializing recognition of gender as a culturally constructed process, especially in the early work.

Williams's conception of the feminine has been discussed from various angles but is most typically regarded as his designation of the material upon and from which the poet works. Within this framework, the poet is male and the inert material female, replicating familiar dichotomies of gender. However, the dichotomy is neither so clear nor so stable. In an important essay defining his poetics, written in 1946, Williams refers to the need for the poet to engage in the "turmoil" of the present and refers to this material context as the "supplying female" ("Letter to an Australian Editor" 208). Commenting upon Williams's use of this phrase, Peter Schmidt perceptively urges us to resist accusing the poet of sexual essentialism. Rather than suggesting a natural and fixed nature for women, the phrase illuminates "Williams' emphasis on the cultural and historical contexts in which all art must be understood." Insisting upon the relationship of art to socioeconomic systems, Williams's designation of the "female" becomes "his metaphor (or personification, giving voice) to all that has been excluded by a dominant culture. Therefore, his definition of the 'supplying female', of what is excluded and silenced, may be seen as a cultural construction subject to contestation and revision" ("Introduction" 6).

This concept of the female long predates the 1946 essay. The revisionary historical essays written and compiled in the early 1920s for *In the American Grain* point to the "feminine" as the excluded and oppressed and silenced, yet simultaneously as the source of a disruptive resistance

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to masculinist containment. This disruptiveness is clearly linked to the quality of contact, a term foundational to Williams's entire body of work. While contact has been understood as an interpenetration of subject and object, arising from an engagement with the ordinary and the daily, *In the American Grain* makes clear that Williams's perception of contact involves alternative notions of authority and is grounded – philosophically, metaphorically, linguistically, and ontologically – in an idea of the feminine. The task of Chapter 2 is to untangle just what this idea of the feminine entails. Continuing from Chapter 1 an analysis of the privileged place of the maternal within Williams's concept of creativity, this second chapter examines the configurations of the maternal and the feminine in *In the American Grain*, particularly as they coalesce within the figure of the Native American. In this text, Williams develops a poetics of the maternal that is characterized by inclusion, contact, and disruption (of the masculine status quo), and is manifested largely through the American Indian. The link between the feminine and the Native American developed throughout the essays constructs the category of “female,” as Schmidt suggests, as a metaphor for “all that has been excluded by a dominant culture.” In effect, the feminine is provisionally politicized as an inclusive and interventionary category; while building an approach to history and culture within this feminine matrix, Williams moves between the poles of essentialism and constructivism to provide a forceful critique of patriarchy that ultimately depends upon the material basis of constructions of gender identity and interaction in America.

In debating Williams's essentialist tendencies, critics have by and large been interested in identifying particular images and treatments of women that are then advanced to illustrate a fixed and universal idea of the feminine. However, as this study argues, Williams's texts continually problematize their own essentialist gestures; moreover, the work as a whole develops complex interactions between fixed ideas of the feminine and socially constructed ideas of gender. In rethinking the issue of essentialism as inescapably a part of Williams's writings and poetic theories, it becomes important to ask *how* essentialism is deployed within specific contexts. Recent reassessments of the essentialist debate among feminist theorists and critics offer helpful points to consider. While an earlier feminist refutation of essentialism has been valuable in challenging naive and reductive notions of an original sexed self, a certain polarization of positions has often resulted in an unquestioning dismissal of essentialism. However, theorists like Diana Fuss and Janet Wolff have argued, with different emphasis, that essentialism need not be automatically condemned but instead investigated for its “possibilities and potential usages” (Fuss, *Essentially Speaking*, xi). Claiming that “essentialism and constructivism are deeply and inextricably co-implicated with each

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other," Fuss persuasively encourages us to "investigate what purpose or function essentialism might play in a particular set of discourses," and to become attentive to essentialism's "certain tactical or interventionary value, especially in our political struggles and debates" (xii). The assumption that essentialism is "bad" is itself an essentializing gesture that renders unproductive judgments rather than grappling with the contextual particulars of the so-called essentialist act. Fuss shifts the focus from evaluation to analysis in asserting that "in and of itself, essentialism is neither good nor bad, progressive nor reactionary, beneficial nor dangerous. The question we should be asking is not 'is this text essentialist (and therefore "bad")?' but rather, 'if this text is essentialist, *what motivates its deployment?*' " (xi).

Thus, while all four poets in this study can, on occasion and to different degrees, be described as using essentialist tactics, my interest is in how this essentialism is evoked, what motivates it, and what distinguishes one kind of essentialism from another. Often deconstructing and constructing female essences simultaneously, these poets anticipate a strategy Fuss identifies in the work of Luce Irigaray – the act of essentializing the female as a displacement of phallogocentric essences: "to give 'woman' an essence is to undo Western phallogocentrism and to offer women entry into subjecthood," a subjecthood prohibited within the mainstream of Western thought arising from Aristotle's association of woman with matter or with lack of soul and essence (71). Levertov's need, for example, to evoke a linguistic essentialism in speaking of women as a collective group becomes a political interventionary strategy supported by an evolving ontological category of "woman" in her poetry – that is, the category of woman based upon an experiencing of reality particular to a woman's consciousness. Simultaneously, however, Levertov investigates the construction of gender in relationship to discourses of power, exploring how the category of woman (particularly in its relationship to the category of "poet") is produced. Rather than getting bogged down in apologies for or laborious castigations of each poet's participation in essentialist notions of "woman," this study calls attention to the interaction between essentialism and constructivism in their works.

Looked at in their particular historical moments, then, these poets might be read as essentializing "against the grain," as provisionally (at least) laying claim to a feminine power that exposes and challenges masculinist assumptions marking poetry and language. What this means, of course, for a male poet must be questioned carefully, and a major objective of this study is to investigate Williams's need to create a decidedly feminine ground for his poetry – for the poetry of a self-asserted male voice and consciousness. This becomes an unresolved conflict for Williams, while at the same time rendering a poetry remarkable in its own

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investigations of gendered authority. It is here that I locate Williams's usefulness to later women poets, as well as his strong link to women modernists who wrote contemporaneously.

The inclusion of Mina Loy in the story of modernism changes many conceptions of that movement, particularly its relationship (whether reactionary or congenial) with feminism's attack upon institutionalized forms of gender. Loy's works clearly exemplify Rita Felski's definition of "feminist literature" as "texts that reveal a critical awareness of women's subordinate position and of gender as a problematic category" (14). In addition, her radical innovations with language – which, like Stein's, preceded the high modernist experiments of Joyce, Pound, and Eliot – coalesce with an explicit feminist politics and produce what Wolff terms "the radical potential of the deconstructive strategies of modernist culture" (63). Loy's strategies of language rupture, montage, and self-reflexiveness work to defamiliarize and question gender ideologies prevalent in her time, and retrieving her work serves to repoliticize modernism's potential.

Bringing Loy's work into a reconsideration of Williams's early radical period illuminates his concern with "gender as a problematic category" and recasts his aesthetic evolution in political terms that link language, gender, and power. A poet who has never fit easily into the academic canon of modernism, Williams, by the 1940s, wanted desperately to be recognized as an important modernist who continued to define himself in opposition to the classical model he perceived in Pound and Eliot. It is arguable that Williams suffered exclusion from New Critical appraisals of modernism for many of the same reasons women like Loy have disappeared. Williams, like Loy or Stein or Moore, inhabited a relationship to "*male avant-garde hegemony*, simultaneously within it and subversive of it," as DeKoven describes the female modernist tradition ("Male Signature" 79). Obviously, Williams's relationship to a masculinist modernism is distinct from that of a female counterstrain; of significant concern, however, is the overlap between the modernisms Williams and his women contemporaries practice as a subversion of masculinist ideologies.

Relocating Williams helps us understand the *potential* his poetic strategies hold for women poets, and also demonstrates his tendency to overwrite the women who most aided him in realizing the gender dimensions of artistic production and expression. Williams certainly places Moore and Stein in his pantheon of poets, and his essays on these writers (from the late twenties and thirties) clarify his debt to their language innovations, particularly as he sees through their example the inextricable tie between language and cultural forms of power. Yet writers like Loy or Dickinson or H.D. are rarely mentioned, or are pushed